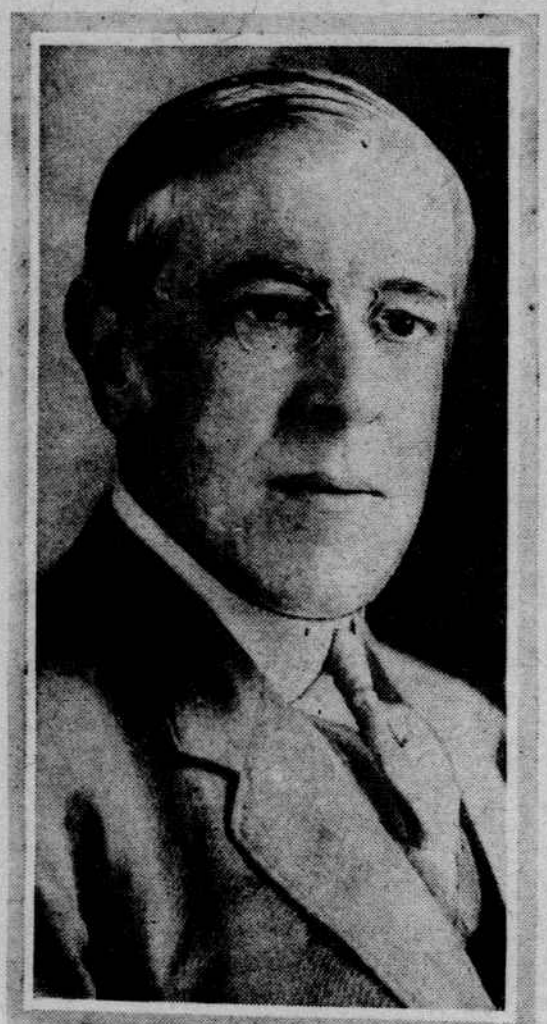
My Adventures in Politics

By EDWARD W. TOWNSEND.

I BEGAN to inquire in my suburban home if I were the only Democrat there, and with the aid of a Jeffersonian friend made up a list of fifty citizens who were suspected of having voted a Democratic ticket. We composed an enticing invitation and sent one to each suspect, asking him to meet at my home on an appointed evening. Six came to the conference; two lawyers, an importer, a garage owner, a politician and a newspaper man. The politician, with comforting words, sought to lift up our hearts. "This is a good start," he said, "for it is social bad form to be a Democrat in this town." Thus revived in spirit we boldly faced social ostracism, and in the course of two years or so we had a Democratic club of two hundred and fifty members.



Woodrow Wilson when he was Governor.

Came the year 1908 when the garage man and the politician called on me to report that I must prove my faith by deeds—run for Congress. I knew that that meant to run without hope of election; only with the hope of helping the party spirit in the district. My political friend later told me how I came to be selected by the county boss, James ugent, for the sacrifice. In making up the county legislative ticket that year a majority of the names it bore indicated a predominance of what in political jargon are called "foreigners," which is an easy way to indicate that the candidates are recent recruits to American citizenship. Mr. Nugent asked my friend to suggest some one with an unmistakably American name to put on the ticket as a candidate for Representative in Congress. My friend promptly responded with my full name, "Edward Waterman Townsend," and Mr. Nugent as promptly rejoined, "Go get him to run." I received the convention nomination, campaigned actively, and to such an extent reduced the customary majority of my opponent, a veteran member of the house, that I received a second nomination in 1910, and was elected.

Mr. Wilson was that year candidate for Governor of New Jersey, and when he spoke in my district I was scheduled to speak with him. This gave me opportunity to study him at close range, and I formed an opinion of him contrary to the general, especially as to his alleged coldness and aloofness. One day, in the course of a long automobile campaign tour, Mr Wilson came into my district at the town of Glen Ridge, where I was sent ahead of him to speak. A large assembly room in a school building was filled, many New York commuters coming out on early trains to attend the meeting, and with them came many of their wives and sisters. When Mr. Wilson arrived, accompanied by another speaker and Mr. Nugent, I was speaking, but promptly made the concluding remarks called for by the etiquette governing the situation; that is, the audience was not to suffer a delay in hearing the chief speaker; but Mr. Wilson signalled me to continue, and whispered something about wanting to catch his breath. I sympathized with the audience, saying that Mr. Wilson had motored so far and fast, and spoken so often he wanted a few minutes before addressing so distinguished a gathering. Anyway, I "got away with it," and the people good naturedly endured my talk five minutes longer. I then hurried to an adjoining town, Bloomfield, and at the meeting there the same incident occurred; but this time I caught a pained look in the eyes of the speaker who accompanied Mr. Wilson. As the next engagement was in a town outside my district I remained at the Bloomfield meeting to hear Mr. Wilson speak, and then he asked me to ride with him to the next meeting, which I did, after Mr. Nugent briskly rearranged the seatings in the flock of automobiles which gave me the seat occupied up to then by the extra speaker. On our way Mr. Wilson explained why he had asked me to speak while he "caught his breath." The speaker accompanying him was a "spellbinder" who was carried along to "hold the audience" for Mr. Wilson. Under that arrangement he had heard the spellbinder repeat a bombastic oration several times before Glen Ridge was reached. "It was dreadful," he said. "No reasoning; no argument; no facts—just shouted words. I felt that I could not endure it again."

After the final afternoon meeting Mr. Nugent announced that the program was to go to a country club dinner. Mr. Wilson sighed. Mr. Nugent said in answer to the sigh, "We need not go there if you do not care to."

"There's the big meeting in Newark to-night," Mr. Wilson said, "and it has been a rather hard day. But I suppose we should go to the club dinner."

Mr. Nugent told an aid to telephone to the club an explanation why Mr. Wilson regretted that he could not keep his dinner engagement. The candidate listened to this order, then with a twinkle in his eyes said, "Now you and Townsend and I can have a quiet, undisturbed dinner in some little restaurant. Eh?" We dined in a private room of a good restaurant, a Nugent henchman guarding the door with orders that we were not to be disturbed unless the building were on fire.

The relations between the two men at that time was interesting. The university president was not, as has been widely assumed, lacking in that wisdom which is supposed to come only from long experience in the knockabout world. He knew, even then, much worldiness not taught in college lecture halls, and applied that knowledge to his new ventures into political activities. In a corresponding degree Mr. Nugent was not the "roughneck" a political boss is popularly suposed to be; indeed, he was enough of a musician to make good opera his favorite entertainment, and his reading was along lines of high class, and in other respects he failed to match the cartoonist's portrait of the typical political boss.

Grins followed when cocktails were served at that dinner; each of us wondered why the other had done as he had done, pushed the untasted appetizer aside. Mr. Wilson commented first. "Gentlemen," he said, glancing at the untouched glasses, and affecting a stern professorial manner, "I approve of moderation, but are we now verging upon fanaticism? As for me, I could not deliver my speech to-night if I drank that cocktail. But you?"

"I never touch them," Mr. Nugent said.

"I cut them out during a campaign," I said.

"Ah," said the professor. "Each has a fair excuse for not being prepared. I rejoice that we are not fanatics."

As neither Mr. Nugent nor I were to speak that night we further relieved Mr. Wilson's fears by paying proper attention to a bottle of champagne which arrived in due course.

As we dined, discussing any current topic except politics, Mr. Nugent rose and fussed about in the pockets of his overcoat. "What are you looking for?" Mr. Wilson asked him.

"A time table," he answered. "I want to get you to bed before 1 o'clock in the morning. It's too late. You don't get enough rest."

"He's just pretending to be looking after my comfort," Mr. Wilson said in a stage aside to me. "The fact is he is eager to be rid of me as soon as possible."

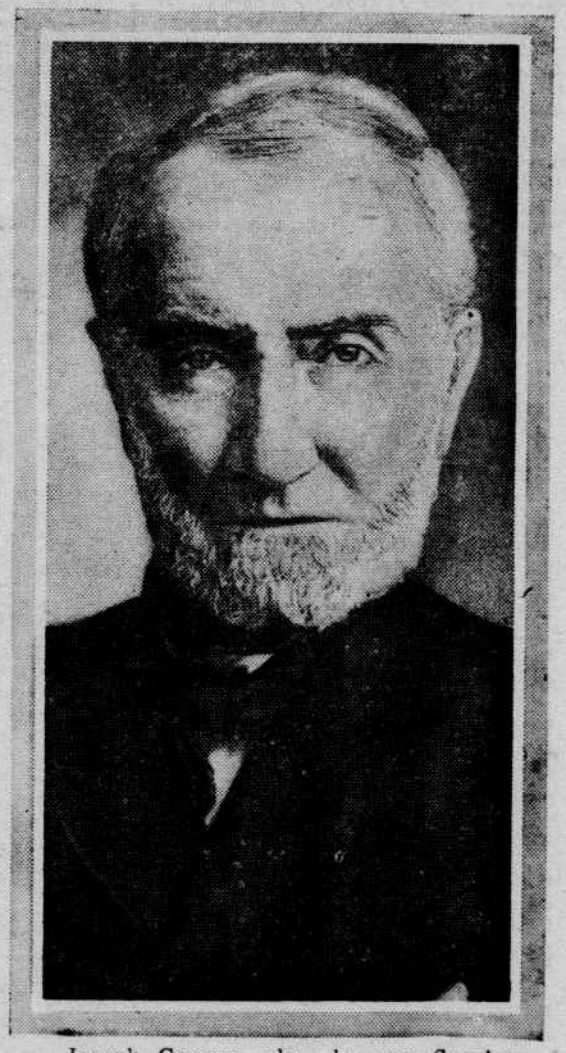
The boss grinned at this. But he staged that night's great meeting so that the candidate for Governor was in bed by midnight.

I have said that we did not discuss politics at dinner, but that did not hold me from satisfying a curiosity about the kind and degree of preparation Dr. Wilson gave to his political speeches. These, it will be recalled, attracted wide attention, much of it directed to their literary quality even in the form they went out from each meeting, unrevised; hasty transcriptions of stenographic notes. Good-naturedly answering my questions, Mr. Wilson said that his preparation was in deciding upon his topics, the order in which they were to be taken up, the time he would devote to each and finally deciding upon the treatment of each topic. The matter was not dictated in advance to be written and studied, there were not even pencil notes. I asked why his important speeches almost to a minute took fifty minutes for delivery. That, he said, was because for years his lectures to students were of that length and in his political talks he knew, without looking at a clock, when forty-five minutes had been consumed, and instinctively began summing up. All of his perorations I had heard sounded as if they had been prepared in form as well as matter. He smiled at my pertinacity as I asked about that. "Yes," he said, "if I think of a form which seems attractive for the ending of a speech I rehearse it mentally until the words are arranged about as I deliver them, I think."

To my mind Mr. Wilson's use of inflection in place of emphasis; or, perhaps one should say, his ability to produce dramatic effect by manner of delivery instead of volume of sound, was one of the charms of his speaking; an ability actors strive for, and those only are great actors who achieve it. I saw two comedians in the rich comedy part of a play called "Big Bonanza." The actor's best situation and best line came together; one actor took them by screaming the line and falling on a sofa waving arms and legs, and gained a second's applause; the other took the situation motionless, spoke the line as if in a daze, and "stopped the show" as the saying is, until his audience recovered from a hysteria of laughter and had wiped their streaming eyes. This is not to say that Mr. Wilson sought to gain effect by copying the actor's art, but that the actor gained his effect by copying nature.

It does not seem that Mr. Wilson could have been unmindful that the big boss, his daily companion for weeks, was skillfuly saving him from many annoyances of political campaigning; that he took trouble to do so not only because the candidate, temperamentally, was little adapted to endure the rough personal contacts difficult to avoid in campaigning, but also because the boss had a personal liking for the college president. Yet they quarreled. This was regretted by friends of both, but it was inevitable. Mr. Nugent, after Mr. Wilson was elected Governor, had a professional politician's views as to the course which should be pursued by the Chief Executive of the State to insure future party success. Their views conflicted; neither could see merit in the other's position, and friction ended in a final break.

My own modest success in campaigning produced one funny result. I was working hard on the issue of Cannonism, or Czarism, in the House, and perhaps presented it in some new form, and through the good nature of my former newspaper associates some of my sayings received a "good press," as Paris has taught us to say. At least one of my anti-Cannon offerings traveled as far afield as Danville, in the Eighteenth Congressional district of Illinois, the home town of Uncle Joe Cannon. Soon after that I received a letter from Mr. Cannon's secretary, written with flaming pen, assuring me that I was not honorable and would not be an Honorable as the result of the election. He labored hard over the use of lower and upper case "h" to indicate his disesteem of me and my campaign methods, and his sturdy conviction that I was doomed to deserved defeat. Unconscious humor is not without its charm. The letter amused me for a day, and I would have forgotten it had I not chanced to meet Mr. Riggs, THE SUN'S chief political writer, of whom I spoke in a previous chapter. He greeted me with solemn mien, saying that all was over with me; Uncle Joe's secretary had written to him ordering that a long attack on me



Joseph Cannon when he was Speaker.

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